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The Impact of a Eurocentric Curriculum on Students from the Global South and North

Abstract

While research on the impact of a Eurocentric curriculum has often focused on marginalized populations in developing nations, it is paramount that scholars also examine the impact of this curriculum on students in the Global North. To this end, this paper begins by first defining and then critiquing what is often referred to as the “Eurocentric curriculum”, and how standard Eurocentric content, such as Eurocentric mathematics and its pedagogical practices may alienate learners from their families, societies, and cultures. It will then suggest an alternative approach, “Ethno-mathematics” introduced by D’Ambrosio (1985), and will apply this concept to educational outcomes in both South Africa and the USA. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of how these cultural imbalances within a school’s curriculum, if not corrected, may negatively impact the academic success of all students, particularly the marginalized.

Keywords: Eurocentric curriculum, ethnocentric curriculum, Global North, Global South, marginalization, South Africa, USA

Introduction

Building upon scholarship that includes an examination of educational inequalities and challenges within US and post-apartheid South African schools (Biraimah, Roets & Kurtz, 2022), there appears to be a need for more effective practices that can provide greater equitable access to, and success within quality education programs for all learners. For example, educators might consider including and/or enhancing intercultural competencies and the inclusion of indigenous knowledge across all content areas. To explore this notion, this paper focuses on the introduction of an ethnocentric curriculum as an alternative to the pervasive Eurocentric curriculum which remains an enduring example of colonialism and neo-colonialism worldwide.

From “Center-Periphery” to “Eurocentric” theories

According to Altbach (1981), some institutions and universities are perceived as intellectual “centers” that model the “gold standard” of curriculum, instruction, and research production, and these institutions are often located in the Global North, such as Princeton University in the US or Cambridge University in the UK. In contrast, there are the “peripheral” institutions, usually comprised of recently established institutions in the Global South, such as the University of Botswana, or lesser known, or recently established colleges and universities in the Global North, such Florida Polytechnic

University, established in 2012 in the US state of Florida. While these labels are less commonly assigned to colleges and universities in the 21st century, the concept of center/periphery universities appears to have evolved into perceptions of Western-centric or Eurocentric institutions and scholarships.

Clearly, these labels reflect a sustained intellectual hierarchy where Eurocentric institutions and curriculum reinforce their own histories and cultures while essentially ignoring the values and contributions of alternate ways of living and knowing. For example, Eurocentric curriculum is often defined as:

- a) curricula generally focused on European issues and perspectives, with little or no acknowledgement of Asian or African contributions;
- b) curricula focused primarily on the European knowledge system that has been advanced with a clear disregard for other knowledge systems;
- c) curricula that perpetuate intellectual dependence on a small group of prestigious Western academic institutions that determine the subject matter and methods of research; and/or
- d) curricula often leading to negative attitudes and beliefs about alternate civilizations and lifestyles, while confirming stereotypical perceptions regarding “other” non-Europeans.

In brief, it appears that the earlier theories regarding neo-colonialism and/or center-periphery have simply morphed into concepts of a “Eurocentric” nature, including terms such as “Western-centrism”, and/or “Global North/Global South” institutions and nations.

The term Eurocentric was originally introduced by Samir Amin (1931-2018), often described as an Egyptian-French Marxian economist and political scientist involved in various dependency theories. Building upon this scholarship, the concept of Eurocentrism has now been applied to the field of curriculum and has garnered a great deal of criticism over the years. For example, Eurocentric curriculum has a) been linked to negative neo-colonial and imperial implications; b) considered Western Europe as the superior cultural center; c) perpetuated a worldview centered on superior European/White ways of knowing; and d) often viewed various non-European societies as undemocratic and subservient.

The impact of a Eurocentric curriculum on the Global South

As a Eurocentric curriculum may have a particularly negative impact on both the Global South, as well as marginalized populations within the Global North, this paper will focus on both populations, beginning with the perceived impact of the Eurocentric curriculum on the Global South, with more specific examples of its impact on students and learning in South Africa.

When contemplating the impact of the Eurocentric curriculum on the Global South, we first need to assess the possible outcomes of both cultural displacement and loss of identity. For example, a Eurocentric curriculum can reinforce colonial and neo-colonial mentalities and power relationships while excluding local perspectives. Moreover, this curriculum is often embedded with examples from the West/Europe while perpetuating language barriers and academic underachievement for students in the Global South. Moreover, when a Eurocentric curriculum is imposed on the Global South it can also maintain a) unequal access to educational and economic opportunities; b) economic

dependency on Europe and the West; c) a disregard for indigenous and local knowledge and cultural traditions; and d) a distorted perception of historical narratives.

Decolonizing Eurocentric curriculum: examples from Ghana and South Africa

Until recently, school curriculum in countries such as Ghana (a former British Colony known as the Gold Coast) focused on a British rather than a Ghanaian/African curriculum. For example, students in English classes read Eurocentric (Bronte and Shakespeare) not African (Achebe or Thiong'o) literature. They also tended to focus on the geography and history of Europe and the UK, and not their own countries. As an example, in the past Ghanaian secondary school students were more skilled at finding London than Accra or Tamale on a map, and they often knew more about the kings of England than their own Asantehene (a powerful chief of the Ashanti empire).

Moreover, as textbooks were often in short supply, particularly soon after independence, many schools had to depend on discarded textbooks published in London or Paris. One example of the often inappropriateness of these textbooks could be found in one math book donated to Ghana during the 1960 that included Algebraic problems featuring cars skidding on ice! A rather difficult problem for students to conceptualize in tropical West Africa. While it is not the responsibility of Western scholars to assess the degree to which Eurocentric and/or Western-centric themes have dominated curriculum within African schools, we do look forward to successful efforts to decolonize the curriculum by African scholars who have received their education from Africa-based schools and universities. For example, instead of maintaining a focus on colonial and neo-colonial issues, as well as the “gifts” brought by the colonizers and missionaries, it might be more important for students to learn about the extended resistance and rebellion of various African populations who fought to maintain their civilizations, cultures, and indigenous knowledge in the face of European intrusion.

Examples of active moves to decolonize can also be found throughout the Republic of South Africa. Though perhaps a more complicated history than many former African colonies, South Africa continues to move beyond colonial legacies within their education system. For example, a key issue today focuses on possible cultural erasure, which often includes a denial of indigenous languages, traditions, and knowledge systems that have the potential to contribute to the solution of various local problems. Unfortunately, until now, school curricula, grounded in local context and lived experiences, have been unsuccessful in addressing the country’s pressing issues and challenges. Moreover, the impact of South Africa’s colonial and apartheid past reflects a series of lost opportunities to learn about cultural diversity, social histories, and an essential sense of belonging, as much of the curriculum reflects cultural dissonance brought on by its disconnect from local culture, histories, and lived experience.

Eurocentric curricular impacts in the Global North: the USA example

As the previous discussion suggests, there is no shortage of concern regarding the impact of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and the Eurocentric curriculum on multiple countries within the Global South. However, we would be remiss if we ignored similar problems and impacts of a Eurocentric curriculum on the Global North, particularly within countries with significant underserved minorities such as the US.

When reviewing the brief history of curriculum development in the US, it is important to acknowledge that the major source of content came directly from European colonists who settled primarily along the eastern coast of what was to later become the US. Of course, what was most likely intentionally overlooked by these European colonists was the rich content and diversity of various curricula ingrained within multiple indigenous groups, what some might term the “first Americans”. These unfortunate colonialist and isolationist tendencies regarding what constituted valid curricula content were only strengthened by decades of segregated education in post-independent US states and territories. Clearly, segregated and separate education could never be considered equal education (as successfully argued by Justice Thurgood Marshall in the landmark 1954 US *Brown v. Board of Education* decision). Moreover, up until quite recently, the study of history rarely went beyond the North American continent, and if any mention of African, Eastern European, or Asian cultures/histories were included, they usually appeared as brief addenda. Clearly, until very recently US curriculum simply ignored or denied the existence of indigenous and minorities’ knowledge and “ways of knowing”. Unfortunately, this negation of valid histories was recently replicated in the southern US state of Florida, where in 2023 the Advanced Placement (AP) African American Studies course was removed from an approved list of courses allowed within the state’s public secondary schools. Fortunately, after sustained outcries from the citizens of Florida, the course was returned to the approved list of AP courses available to students in Florida’s secondary schools. However, these struggles to move beyond Eurocentric or often White/Neo-colonial curricula are also challenged by conservative state governments. For example, the current (conservative) governor of Florida recently labeled calls for curriculum diversification and recognition of minoritized contributions as a “woke culture” that should not be tolerated.

In summary, the continual impact of the tradition of a Eurocentric curriculum within the US maintains a sense of cultural alienation within our public schools, where students may continue to experience a sense of alienation from their own histories, and a disconnect from their own cultures. These historical curricula omissions continue to deny the contributions and critical roles played by marginalized populations within US history in many state curricula (in the US, education is controlled by individual states, not the federal government). Thus, we find that marginalized students continue to experience alienation and isolation from their own histories and a disconnect from own cultures through intentional historical omissions designed to deny the contributions and roles played by marginalized populations within the US. Moreover, this curriculum not only reinforces institutionalized and systemic inequalities and stereotypes, but it also presents a narrow worldview which consistently places the US at the center of the world while marginalizing the histories and cultures of “others”. Unfortunately, the drive to enshrine a Eurocentric curriculum is not limited to the liberal arts, but has impacted STEM fields as well, as the following discussion regarding the impact of Eurocentrism on a mathematics curriculum will describe.

The need for an ethnocentric mathematics curriculum

Unfortunately, the negative and limiting impacts of a Eurocentric curriculum are not only found in liberal arts subjects, such as history or literature, but are also found to impact the mathematics and science curricula as well. While a cursory review of the history of mathematics will clearly suggest that mathematics was not an isolated

European phenomenon but had emerged in multiple cultures and locations where numerical skills were applied to a myriad of significant life skills ranging from building a modest home to selling a crop of maize in a local market. For example:

- a) how did folks living in ancient Peru count their goats and oversee their marketing? They certainly didn't wait for the Spanish to arrive with a Eurocentric-math system before trading a goat; or
- b) how did folks living in ancient Hawaii manage their fishing cultures and marketing? They didn't need to wait for Western missionaries to arrive with a Eurocentric-math system before trading their fish and other agricultural products; or
- c) how were distances described before there were miles or kilometers? While many ways may have been derived, the early Roman term "mille passuum" which literally meant "a thousand paces" might suggest a possible source for our mile or kilometer.

The significance of these examples, however, is that they suggest that multiple civilizations, worldwide, managed their lives and economies by inventing their own mathematical systems. Clearly, both isolated and merging civilizations managed their lives and economies without a knowledge of Eurocentric mathematics. They incorporated the use of mathematics in their daily lives, but that system was not dependent upon a Eurocentric interpretation of mathematics. As will be discussed in the next section, Eurocentric mathematics was not the only system of mathematics.

As history suggests, there is not "one mathematics" derived from a Eurocentric curriculum. Rather, varying approaches to mathematics were developed independently, worldwide, to solve everyday problems from trading foodstuffs to measuring distances. What we usually term as "Western mathematics" was developed from the mathematical knowledge of ancient Greeks, while "Eastern mathematics" was developed by ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Chinese, and Indians. However, we now have a third approach to mathematics entitled "Ethnomathematics", which has evolved from various ancient cultures to address their cultural, economic, and practical needs. The term "Ethnomathematics", first introduced by Ubiratan D'Ambrosio of Brazil (D'Ambrosio, 2006) combines the studies of culture and race (ethno) with mathematics. Clearly the goal was to include a broader intercultural perspective within what has been a predominantly Western, Eurocentric narrative. To this end, ethnomathematics can begin by connecting marginalized learners from underrepresented and indigenous groups with their cultural heritage, while helping them (and the world) to realize that their cultures play a significant role in what initially appear to be the unrelated fields of mathematics and cultural studies.

Conclusion

While the goals of educators vary across the globe, one objective consistently shared is to promote a student's personal and social development, a goal obviously nurtured by a rich ethnocentric curriculum. Educators and academics, in theory, are often found supporting the concept of equitable access to quality education for all learners. However, they do not necessarily know how to reach a diverse and often marginalized student population; and thus, the need to explore and apply the concepts of ethnocentric curriculum through enhanced teacher education programs. Unfortunately, simply understanding the concepts and strengths of an ethnocentric curriculum does not

necessarily translate into improved student access and success. For learners and teachers to enjoy the positive outcomes of an ethnocentric curriculum and pedagogy, the following perspectives may help to form a solid base upon which more relevant ethnocentric curriculum and pedagogy can thrive:

- a) all children have the universal right to an equitable educational opportunity;
- b) student poverty may be linked to multiple factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, or disability;
- c) recognizing that poverty and marginality are complex problems linked to multiple social issues, and not simply the reflection of the self-fulfilling prophecy of student failure;
- d) the level of student performance may be the result of cultural or economic inequities, rather than assumed cultural or intellectual deficits; and
- e) the need for enhanced intercultural competencies within classrooms, based on a curriculum which is ethnocentric, not Eurocentric.

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